

Academic precarity in Germany – #IchBinHanna in #ResearchWonderland

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I started writing this text slightly more than a year ago, in March 2023, as I was contemplating my future in German academia and after the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) had published key points for the planned amendment to the Act on Fixed-Term Employment Contracts in Academia (in German *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz* or *WissZeitVG*). First introduced in 2007, the *WissZeitVG* makes it possible to limit the duration of the employment contracts of academic and artistic staff beyond the restrictions of the law on part-time and fixed-term contracts. It states that researchers cannot spend more than 12 years on temporary contracts after starting their PhD. Unless they can secure a permanent job in academia, members of the so-called mid-level faculty (in German *akademischer Mittelbau*) are given the boot. The stated intention of the law was to compel higher education institutions to give researchers permanent positions after this initial period of 12 years. Although fixed-term contracts are pervasive across academia in the entire world, in Germany the situation is particularly alarming. According to a study conducted by German Trade Union Confederation in 2020, 78 per cent of academics are on fixed-term contracts, a sharp contrast to the 8 per cent of employees working under these conditions in the economy as a whole.¹ Here is a Reader's Digest version for anyone uninterested in the workings of German education policy: over a year later, as of May 2024, nothing of substance has happened.

The central problem of the proposed changes to *WissZeitVG* is the length of contracts on doctoral and postdoctoral levels. The amendment from March 2023

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¹ Dietmar Hobler and Stefan Reuß, *DGB-Hochschulreport – Arbeit und Beschäftigung an Hochschulen in Deutschland* (Berlin: DGB Bundesvorstand, 2020), p. 11.

proposed a non-binding recommendation (*Soll-Vorschrift* in German) of initial three-year contracts for doctoral students as well as the halving of the longest possible postdoctoral contracts from six years to three for those postdocs financed from the university household budget.² Just how out of touch with reality the proposed amendments turned out to be can be summarised as follows: less than 48 hours after BMBF's announcement on Twitter, a representative of the ministry backtracked, saying that the bill would be withdrawn and that future discussions about further amendments would include representatives from different academic interest groups. Additionally, more than 3,000 professors from German higher education institutions signed an open protest letter declaring solidarity with non-tenured academic staff and calling the key points of the planned amendment a 'political reinterpretation' and a *Verschlimmbesserung*, a marvellous German compound noun that can be translated as 'an attempt to improve something only to end up making it worse'.³ The proposed amendments also provoked a reaction from German academics abroad, who argued that it would lead to an even worse brain drain of German academics.⁴

Since the initial debacle, countless talks and meetings between representatives of the BMBF and those of the higher education and other research institutions, trade unions and university associations have taken place. Finally, at the end of March 2024 the Federal Cabinet approved the reform bill, where the length of postdoctoral contracts was yet again amended by the ministry and yet again, failed to improve anything or take into account the opinions of those who are employed on such contracts. In essence, the new amendment uses a 4+2 formula: after an initial four-year contract, a researcher can be given an extension of two years, but only if they are subsequently guaranteed a permanent position. In true Orwellian doublespeak, the federal minister for education and research Bettina Stark-Watzinger hailed the reform of the *WissZeitVG*, claiming it would 'make a significant contribution to improving working conditions in science, which is a decisive factor

² Under the current *WissZeitVG*, researchers in medicine may work on a fixed-term contract for up to nine years during the postdoctoral phase, provided that they pursue a habilitation while completing their specialist training. With the proposed amendment, they will no longer have the option of an extension of their employment.

³ 'Revise and Resubmit: Criticism of the Planned Reform of the *WissZeitVG* from the Perspective of German Professors', <<https://uni-koeln.sciebo.de/s/t9LUIWSYfyVTmUq>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

⁴ Dorothee Goetze, Lena Oetzel and Jan Süselbeck, '#ResearchWonderland statt Brain Drain? Internationale Stellungnahme zur geplanten Änderung des Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetzes (*WissZeitVG*)', <<https://literaturkritik.de/researchwonderland-statt-brain-drain,29601.html>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

for attracting talented young people to science and research in the competition for the brightest minds'.⁵

The obtuseness of the Ministry of Education and Research is all the more stunning considering that this is not the first time members of German academia have sounded alarms about the decision-makers' wilful ignorance of working conditions of German academics. Ever since the law's introduction in 2007, members of the academic community have been dissatisfied with it. In 2021, BMBF was forced to remove from their website an animated video starring a junior researcher called Hanna, which appeared to celebrate academic precarity by implying that fixed-term contracts were necessary for innovation and the prevention of one generation of academics 'clogging up' the academic works.⁶ According to Kristin Eichhorn, one of the authors of the book *#IchBinHanna: Prekäre Wissenschaft in Deutschland*, the video was particularly infuriating because of its implication that the ministry was satisfied with the outcome of the law, suggesting that it was the goal of the higher education system to 'use people to get the best impact' and then spit them out 'to the market'.⁷

While the intricacies of the German higher education system are too many and varied to write about here, two points related to the national hullabaloo around fixed-term contracts in academia are worth emphasising. The first is the unique chair-based structure of German universities, in which a single tenured professor has near-absolute power over research staff ranging from student assistants to postdocs, all on fixed-term contracts, a part-time secretary, and the chair's research budget. The department serves as a loose union of chairs, but employment decisions are almost always taken by the professors themselves. Constantly hiring new staff is surely a strain on the chair's resources and makes it difficult to plan teaching and supervision activities over a longer time period. More importantly, however, options for early tenure beyond professorship are microscopic within this chair-based system. As the signed letter from German tenured faculty states, many departments at German universities do not have a single permanent position for academic mid-level staff (that is, below the professorial level). The graph below shows that while the number of fixed-term contracts exploded at German

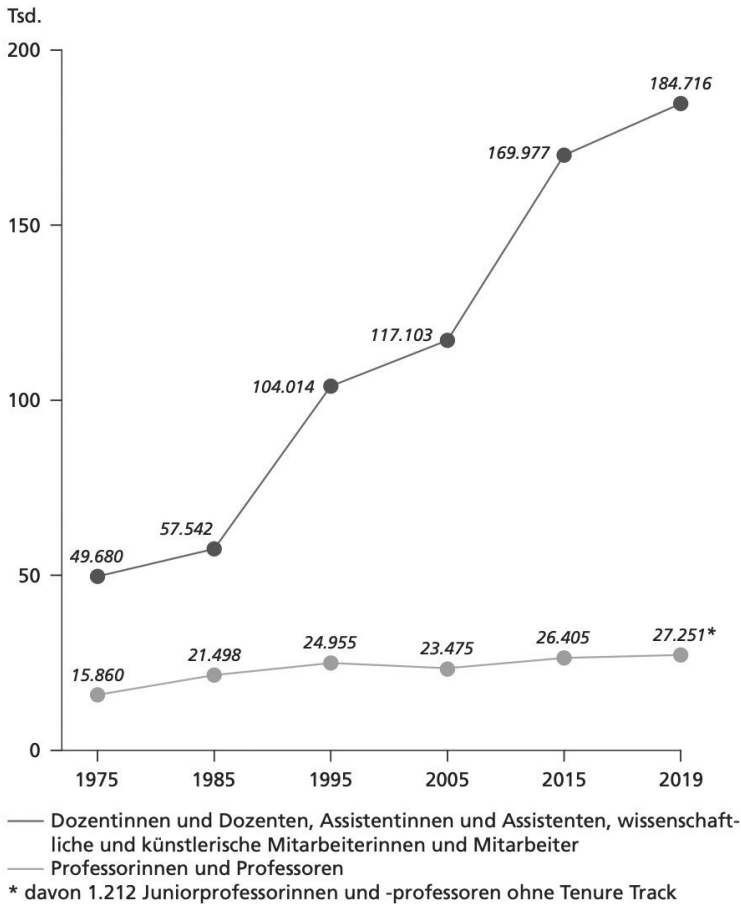
⁵ Press release of the Federal Ministry of Research and Education, 'Stark-Watzinger: Wir verbessern die Arbeitsbedingungen in der Wissenschaft', 27 March 2024, <<https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/pressemitteilungen/de/2024/03/270324-WissZeitVG.html>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

⁶ The video is still available on YouTube: <<https://youtu.be/PIq5GIY4h4E>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

⁷ Dave Matthews, '#IchbinHanna: German researchers snap over lack of permanent jobs', *Times Higher Education*, 21 June 2021, <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ichbinhanna-german-researchers-snap-over-lack-permanent-jobs>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

higher education institutes between 1975 and 2019, the number of professorships, including junior professorships without tenure track, increased only marginally.⁸ Unsurprisingly, an official evaluation of the WissZeitVG conducted in 2022 on behalf of BMBF revealed no significant changes in the fixed-term employment practices: 84 per cent of employees at doctoral and postdoctoral levels at German universities were employed under fixed-term contracts.⁹

Abbildung 2 Akademisches Personal und Professuren an Universitäten und gleichgestellten Hochschulen im Vergleich, 1975–2019



⁸ Tweet by Jennifer S. Hencke (@jenniferhenkeHB), 24 June 2021, <<https://twitter.com/jenniferhenkeHB/status/1408023500602937344?s=20>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

⁹ Jörn Sommer et al., *Evaluation des novellierten Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetzes* (Berlin and Hannover: HIS-Institut für Hochschulentwicklung, 2022), p. 15.

The continuing wide-spread use of fixed-term contracts has also been made painfully clear by the discussions surrounding the *WissZeitVG*. It is obvious that one piece of legislation cannot fix everything that is wrong with the German higher education system, because in reality the *WissZeitVG* does not regulate anything except for how long PhD students and postdocs can be employed. Other related problems like staffing issues, and especially the lack of a clear academic path at German universities, were also acknowledged in the coalition treaty signed in 2021 by the new so-called traffic light coalition made up of the Social Democratic Party, the Free Democratic Party and the Greens. The treaty specifically highlights working conditions in science as a target area and states that the aim is ‘to create permanent positions for permanent tasks at German universities’.¹⁰ However, not one concrete step has been taken in that direction on the federal level. As the graph above shows, there are currently not enough permanent positions available and there are no additional funds allocated to increase these numbers. Since the *WissZeitVG* does not direct additional funds to higher education institutions, which would allow them to increase the number of permanent positions and create a logical path from temporary to permanent employment, all it does is shove more responsibility onto the individual universities, which they are unable to shoulder. Considering the precarious financial position that many German universities, including my own employer, are currently in, the law will lead to yet another impasse without offering any real way out from the quagmire.

The second idiosyncrasy of the German higher education system is that the fixed-term positions are understood to serve qualification purposes, which for many serves as a justification for why there are so few permanent jobs below the professorial level. Notably, that applies not only to the doctoral degree, but also concerns the formal ‘habilitation’ degree, a postdoctoral qualification required to become a tenured university professor. This qualification is no longer deemed necessary in every subject area and/or higher education institution in Germany on the road to professorship, but history remains one of the subjects where chances of becoming a chair professor without habilitation remain fairly low. While the end product – a substantial piece of original research in the form of either a monograph or an article collection – does not differ much from the idea of the ‘second book’, which is familiar to most historians, there are additional hoops to jump through in order to become a *Privatdozent*. The habilitation should be broader in scope than a doctoral dissertation, and its thematic focus, except for the studied time period, should differ significantly from the scholar’s previous research. Meta-

¹⁰ *Mehr Fortschritt wagen – Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit. Koalitionsvertrag 2021–2025 zwischen SPD, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP*, 24 November 2021 <<https://www.spd.de/koalitionsvertrag2021/>> [accessed 17 June 2024], p. 19.

phorically speaking, the doctoral dissertation and the habilitation book should be the two legs upon which a scholar's academic career can firmly stand. However, if scientific excellence has already been demonstrated on the basis of a doctoral dissertation (a consensus that most Western European universities share), requiring a habilitation book is an exercise in redundancy. Outside academia, the habilitation serves little to no purpose. Indeed, the previous president of the German Research Foundation called the habilitation degree 'obsolete' in 2006, claiming that it was an instrument of domination by veteran professors over young academics, probably hinting at the fact that during the habilitation phase, the researcher remains dependent on a supervisor, resulting in a very late entry into academic independence for many German researchers.¹¹

A bigger problem, however, is that employees at the postdoctoral level who are financed from the university's household budget are not primarily researchers at all. Most of our time is taken up by myriad tasks that take precedence over our research, including teaching and supervision every semester. My contract, for example, states that I can dedicate 35 per cent of my employment to research activities geared towards acquiring a habilitation degree (these include trips to archives and writing and presenting conference papers). A six-year contract means that just over two of these years can be spent on researching and establishing myself in a virtually new area and producing my new and innovative book that, mind you, is broader in scope than my doctoral dissertation. Completing this task within the six-year employment period, during which I am required to prioritize a whole slew of duties not related to my research, already verges on the impossible, but with the proposed amendments it would be . . . well, what is more impossible than impossible?

More importantly, research and teaching are not just individual qualification projects but are in fact the *raison d'être* of higher education institutions. While chair professors are generally required to teach a certain number of hours each semester, teaching activities are also performed by student assistants, masters and doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers. The high fluctuation of and uncertainty among academic mid-level staff means that the quality of teaching undoubtedly suffers. There is also a distinct lack of continuity in student supervision and course development, as well as very little incentive for temporary employees to undergo further training in university didactics in order to continue their pedagogical development. Investing a lot of their precious time and energy into teaching is therefore meaningless, since it does not bring them any closer to their professional goals of qualifying for a doctoral or a habilitation degree and getting permanent employment.

¹¹ Andreas Sentker and Martin Spiewak, 'Jagd auf junge Talente. Interview mit Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker', *Die Zeit*, 28 December 2006, p. 32.

The previous leads me to a philosophical reflection. The idea that a stable work situation somehow inhibits innovative research is based on a rather unpleasant image of university employees, implying that somehow, as soon as scientists achieve a certain degree of job security, they go home, kick off their shoes and put their feet up. What does it say about politicians and their view of what we do, when in their mind scientists are primarily people who clog up the system? To the contrary, putting in countless hours of unpaid work after a very long and unjustifiable period of training – I still remember a colleague’s comment that her boss insisted one can choose whether one’s week has five or seven workdays – and being unable to plan one’s career in the long term without depending on the hope of fortunate circumstances can be extremely demoralising. Despite the illusion of meritocracy in academia, most researchers on fixed-term contracts are aware that being dependent on one single person over a long period of time means that their career depends largely on the recommendations of that person. In this dependency relationship, negative criticism can have fatal consequences for one’s career. Contrary to what BMBF’s ignorant video of Hanna tried to argue, namely that fixed-term contracts and the willingness to constantly change jobs is conducive to innovation, the work-related stress that every university employee experiences does not contribute to creative thinking. As an early modernist, for whom actual research is usually preceded by several archival trips, photographing and transcribing the source material, organising it into a database, and only then proceeding with the analysis and interpretation of the sources, I can affirm that good science takes time.

To anyone reading this text, the concept of ‘academic precarity’ is surely nothing new. The problem is also highly topical in Sweden. In a 2021 report, the OECD warned that uncertain working conditions and lack of permanent employment prospects result in many young talents leaving academia.¹² As has also been repeatedly highlighted in the debate on *WissZeitVG*, academic precarity has a particularly strong impact on researchers who need a higher degree of stability, such as international researchers and those with small children and/or disabilities and other health concerns. If only those in possession of a financial cushion are able to teach and conduct research, science loses its heterogeneity, which restricts scientific innovation and leads to decreased academic mobility and diversity. The German example shows that a law, especially one so vaguely formulated as the *WissZeitVG*, is just half of the equation, because it can do only so much to change the academic culture whose very foundation rests on precarity. Instead of shortening the period of qualification at the postdoctoral level and pushing more re-

¹² ‘Reducing the precarity of academic research careers’, *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers*, 20 May 2021, <<https://www.oecd.org/publications/reducing-the-precariety-of-academic-research-careers-0f8bd468-en.htm>> [accessed 17 June 2024].

sponsibility on individual higher education institutions and researchers (to work overtime and feverishly write applications in order to ensure external funding and in that way continue in academia), what we need is more long-term funding and a clearer path to permanent employment. Imagine how high the quality of scientific output could be if most of its producers were not constantly stressed by an eternal search for new jobs and new funding.

For more debates in German social media, see also hashtags *#ResearchWonderland*, *#WissZeitVG*, *#IchBinHanna*, *#IchBinReyhan*, *#ProfsfürHanna*, *#ProfsfürReyhan*.